

## VISUAL IMPAIRMENT: REFLECTION, REFRACTION, AND ASSERTION OF SELF IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF PREETI MONGA, VED MEHTA AND L. SUBRAMANI

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores Disability literature, blind literature and the biography of Preeti Monga, Ved Mehta and L. Subramani. The Reflections of Visual Impairment as Social Empowerment in Preeti Monga's The Other Senses deals with the writings of disabled women who confront the widespread stereotypes in the Indian socio-cultural context. The Redefining Blindness: Refraction and Assertion in Ved Mehta's Face to Face talks about impaired understand of the world with all the powers of their inner light and the profound richness of their inward psyche. The Failing of Vision: Transformation of Deformity into Productivity in L. Subramani's Lights Out is about how the visual impairment is treated in society and the transformation of a physical deformity person into socio-economic productivity and the conclusion mainly focuses on how to overcome the dark shadow with bright insight.*

**KEYWORDS:** Disability Literature, Visual Impairment, Inward Psyche, Physical Deformity & Socio-economic Productivity

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### INTRODUCTION

Differently abled persons secured a unique position in literature. Disability literature is evolved to spotlight the physical, mental, emotional and social affliction of the affected person. Famous tennis player Martina Navratilova remarks that "Disability is a matter of perception if you can do just one thing well. You're needed by someone". Many notable writers extended their mighty hands in disability literature; some of the works of famous writers are Nancy Mairs, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Raymond Carver and John Belluso. Visually impaired writers focus on the problems faced by the blind in their works. They state that if the person is deaf or dumb, they can enjoy nature and see the colourful world. But for the blind, the darkness prevails in their life. Through imagination and fantasy, they can create their world and start to see the nation through their third eye. The visually impaired writers have contributed to the literature from the centuries. Milton, Hellen Keller and Tom Sullivan are notable examples.

Visual impairment is the loss of vision or vision impairment. The issues related to the individual who has witnessed, experienced several things throughout their life are varied. Eventually, the writers selected for this study Preeti Monga, Ved Mehta and L. Subramani, have expressed their feelings subjectively to the readers. Though it has been written in the form of autobiography, the incidents and anecdotes are highly informative for needy people.

The first writer, **Preeti Monga** was born in the year 1959 in Amritsar, India. She is the eldest daughter of Manmohan Kaur and Charanjit Singh. At the age of six, her teachers posted complaints and meetings due to her

considerable decline in her academics. Their family doctor diagnosed her declining eyesight and stated that she would gradually become visionless in the future. Then, she was enrolled in Loreto Convent School. The school dismissed her within two years by stating Monga's blindness affect other children's education. Then, she was sent to Music school to learn Sitar. She earned her diploma from the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya located in New Delhi. Her classical education sprouted assertiveness to acquire a high school certificate.

Though many criticised Monga by saying Aerobics instructor is not a suitable profession for her. She took it as a challenge in 1988 and become a successful entrepreneur and fitness instructor. She launched her own aerobics classes and became India's first blind aerobics instructor. She started her writing career by sending articles to *Hindustan Times*, *The Times of India* and other magazines which inspired her to create two of her autobiographies proficiently.

Monga then joined hands with NGOs and offered awareness programmes. She created the non-profit organization 'Silver Linings' which provides the best education for visually impaired children. Her autobiographical works are *The Other Senses* and *Flight without Sight*. She is honoured with several awards globally. Chief Minister of Delhi Shila Dikshit presented Godfrey Philips National Bravery Award for Social Act of Courage in 1999. She achieved the Silver Phoenix Award from the Indian Institute of Planning and Management. Monga received National Award for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities from the President of India in the year 2013. In 2015, she got State Award for Exceptional Achievement in Entrepreneurship by the Department of Social Welfare, GNCT of Delhi. She won Dr. Verghese Kuien Award by Rex in 2016. The University of Chicago honoured her Women Entrepreneurs of India in 2017. Monga received Ashoka Fellowship and achieved Rex Karmaveer Chakra Award. In 100 Woman Faces, she won Womenovator in 2018. She also received IIT Delhi's Women Achievers Award in 2019. These are some of the laurels to her professional growth and literary career.

Resembling Preeti Monga, the second author, the diasporic writer **Ved Prakash Mehta** secured an exclusive place in blind literature. He was born in India but established his career in the United States. He was born in the year 1934 in Lahore to a Punjabi Hindu family. His vision became impaired at the age of three due to cerebrospinal Meningitis. In 1949 he joined the Arkansas School for the blind. He has completed BA from Pomona College and BA in modern history from Balliol College at Oxford in 1959. In 1961 he has completed Master's degree from Harvard University. His passion for reading made him an enthusiastic writer and energetic journalist.

Ved Mehta worked at *The New Yorker* Magazine for three decades. He has written twenty-seven books. Some of his works are as follows. *Face to Face: An Autobiography*, *Walking the Indian Street*, Twelve volume memoir for troubled *Modern History of India*. He became MacArthur Fellow in 1982 through his elegant profile. In 2009, he was elected as a Member of the Royal Society of Literature. He obtained honorary degrees from multiple universities like Bard College, Williams College, Stirling University and Bowdoin College.

The third writer and the journalist **L. Subramani** also suffer from vision impairment. He was born in May 1973 to a Hindu orthodox family at Madras. He has completed his Master's degree at Loyola College in English language and Literature from the year 1991 to 1996. He became blind at the age of eighteen. His specialities are Technology writing, report writing on disability affairs, education, health, medical research, sports and music. Besides being a writer, he also proliferated as an editor for the past seven years. Currently, he is working in-house as a copy editor at *Deccan Herald*. He acted as a volunteer and helps the patients to cope up with personal and professional life for the past eleven years. He is a very dedicated, committed, newsworthy spokesperson from Bangalore city.

L. Subramani published *Lights Out* in January 2014 which depicts the story of a young man's descent into blindness. He portrays the normal man's life becomes dark inch by inch. He slowly lost sight due to Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) an incurable genetic retinal disease. He has received an excellence award in December 2014 from National Institute for the visually handicapped. In 2015 he was felicitated by the government of Karnataka for his work and being the role model on December three at World Disability Day.

The present study is an effort to examine the autobiographies of these three literary icons. Though these writers lost their vision at different ages of childhood, their endurance to overcome struggle made them reach the pinnacle. They cannot see the world after their progressive blindness but made others visualize the universe through their vision. The writers and their memoirs have chosen for this study is the highly motivational background for the readers. Their inner fire is the ultimate result of success in their life. Even though they are guided by the family members, their individual effort is the main reason for their career and empowerment to lead a reputed life.

**Reflections of Visual Impairment as Social Empowerment in Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses*** candidly describe the societal attitude for causing problems to blind people. In *The Other Senses*, Preeti Monga describes the tribulations of the blind people in two-fold one as a blind and another one as a girl. Blind people are often treated differently in society. Monga also faced such sort of troubles throughout her life. People around her feel sympathetic for her. She understands that it is because of her blindness. She slowly and steadily has taken into the new world which gives her soothing comfort. It is none other than the world of her parents and her little brother. She slowly develops the attitude of joining them and resuming the usual life experience. Starting from her childhood days till her marriage, she is like a phoenix bird that regenerates every time and asserts herself into this society. She feels that as a girl child, she is doubly penalized. Her love of nature itself proved what kind of aesthetic temperament she has. When her aunt gifted a pair of jeans, she is so excited to wear them and find herself more beautiful.

According to Preeti Monga, marriage is not made in heaven but is designed by external features and economic status. Her first marriage with Keith proves an utter failure. But for the sake of children and society, she tried her level best to cope up with him. Brutality in the form of male chauvinism troubles their married life and leads to the level of divorce. According to her, she needs a companion not for carnal desire but for a force to guide, protect and help her on all occasions. Her affairs before marriage with Govinda and Narendira also ended abruptly because of her blindness.

She gains several skills like knitting, embroidering, dance, type writing and swimming. Preeti finds Ashwani who is ten years younger than her as a suitable life partner. She proposed to him and despite initial vacillation, he agreed to marry her. However, she was anguished by getting separated from her beloved children. Her second marriage takes place on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1996 and she writes about her feeling of separation from the children who had come to give her their blessings. As far as she could reach, Preeti went to every forum, piloted workshops, delivered lectures, and conducted training sessions as much as possible. This book is a true story of the indomitable spirit of a human being in the face of several adversities, losses, trials and tribulations.

### **Redefining Blindness: Refraction and Assertion in Mehta's *Face to Face***

Medically defining the term 'refraction' refers to Eye refraction and how the power of eyeglasses or lenses is measured based on the bending light rays to process visual stimuli. Animals rely mainly on hearing, smell, or touch to understand the world around them, whereas human beings rely mostly on vision. Being blind provides a lot of courage and resilience.

Blind people are often considered incapable of doing things. But they are more intelligent than the normal person. It is evident that India is a dwelling place for nearly 20 percent of the world's visually impaired people. According to a report, nearly forty million people and 1.6 million children are visually impaired or blind. (*The Tribune India* 2019). India is the third-largest country which holds about 12 million blind people. It is estimated that in 2020, 30.1 million people are blind in India. Most visually impaired and blind people are over 50; however, vision loss affects people of all ages. Visual impairment poses a huge economic burden on the world.

This part attempts to redefine the sense of refraction with regard to blindness by dexterously delineating the diverse challenges encountered by Ved Parkash Mehta. He is strong-hearted and firm in achieving what he aspires. A blind man's privilege is the freedom of movement. He moved mountains breaking all his self-doubts, pushing forward to the maximum extent he can to break free all the taboos of being blind who's considered it as a weakness.

Mehta was blind from an early age and is known for his autobiography published in series between 1972 and 2004. For many years, he has contributed his write-ups for *The New Yorker*. He has authored twenty-seven books, which include the autobiographical series *The Exile Continent*. He is the recipient of the MacArthur Prize and a member of the Royal Society of Letters. From 1961 to 1994, he served as a contributing writer for *The New Yorker* and taught writing at many colleges and universities.

In *Face to Face*, Ved outlines his hardship in a form of event telling. At the age of fifteen, he flew to the USA lonely and gained a very good education which turned his life style. His higher education at Oxford and Harvard gives enormous energy to improve his personality and also breaks the myth that blind people are hopeless or helpless. Blind people often felt themselves as underprivileged psychologically or sociologically. People like Ved give confidence to the existing supportive system for blind people. He learns the art of riding a bicycle by himself. He does not want to learn under the mercy or sympathy of others. When his father engaged a vocal master for him to learn music, the vocal master's prejudiced act humiliated him greatly. His blindness here artfully refracted toward acquiring the skills to learn and earn more independently than others. At Duncan's school, he realizes his progress in education and he wholeheartedly felt his independence for the first time.

Ved in his *My Second Home* feels that he receives a great level of confidence only in New York. As an immigrant to New York and a blind man in inland or foreign land supplies a lot of courage to stand some of the loneliest and darkest hours. He is always in trouble with repeated weird dreams of people humiliating or attacking him. He doesn't depend on anyone rather stands alone and succeeds in his life.

Failing of Vision: Transformation of Deformity into Productivity in L. Subramani's *Lights Out* has focused on real-life recitation. Apart from educational and economic status, every society has its own socio-cultural and socio-religious and ritual practices. The connotation of perfect human beings changes across the world religions and cultures. Likewise, men and women with physical deformities are not given importance or priority equally across territorial cultures and global societies. This essay of the variegated influences on the life of the visually impaired has been analysed. The narrator L. Subramani shares his personal experience and emotional feelings at the time of his progressive blindness through his memoir.

The objective of this study mainly focuses on how human beings should develop self-confidence in order to overcome the oddities in their life. Brooding is not the only solution for shortcomings. L. Subramani, no doubt is a source

of inspiring spirit to the persons who lost their hope. In fact, Subramani and others in a network helped the people who are affected with retinal disorders by means of giving suggestions in connection with rehabilitation, training, and, most importantly, a cure.

According to him, most people are not aware of the role of technology in the field of progressive blindness. In order to create awareness, he has produced this book. His anguish is connectively described as a dreaming schoolboy. The author portrays the physical and psychological condition of the individual's progressive blindness and its impact on his family members. Further, how this retinal disorder affects the person's normal life and his education. He also warns that there is no meaning to spend money on miracle workers, divine interventionists, astrologers. But they have to develop inner strength which can be achieved only through prayer.

*Lights Out* artistically describe L.Subramani's progressive blindness. As an adolescent boy, his mental state at the time of slow loss of vision is really pitiable but the way in which he gains a force inwardly is to be a source for people who suffer this kind of deformity. He encounters this problem at the age of seventeen during his higher secondary course. Boys at this age have a lot of bubbling imagination through their futuristic vision. He also tries to cope with his friends' invitation for playing cricket or visiting the cinema theatre. Psychologically, he does not expect other's sympathy for his disability or inability.

L.Subramani sketches his failing of vision for a period of six months in his book. At the same time, his transformation from deformity into productivity is the core of this thesis. It is really pathetic that all familiar objects in front of his eyes are slowly faded away due to his progressive blindness. He significantly titled his book *Lights out* which symbolically refers to the light in his eyes. The light may be out but the light inside his heart starts brightly with the mission. He suffers from Retinitis Pigmentosa during his high school study. He writes this book not to entertain the reader but to enlighten the person who has lost his hope. He wishes to guide them to NGOs who are rendering their services by means of giving awareness programmes and necessary help to the individual. Though there is no cure for most retinal disorders, they encourage them how to find a path on their own.

This study mainly focuses on the problem faced by the person who encounters blindness in total or partial. Whatever the percentage of blindness, the 'blind people' inevitably fall into the category of 'other's sympathy or mocking'. In the poem "Ode to a Nightingale" John Keats has written about the dreadful disease 'tuberculosis'. Readers enjoyed the poem but fail to identify the poet's real pain and suffering at the time of his writings. In fact, the tone of the poem delivers the message that nothing in this world is permanent i.e. immortal. He metaphorically addressed the bird as an 'immortal bird'. Likewise, the writers who have contributed their work not only for commercial purposes but also to educate the stakeholders as well as the society.

The background of the disability literature is extensively discussed in the introductory chapter gives ample scope for the future scholar to pursue their research work in this area. Disability is a broad term that encompasses various physical deformities. Being blind, the scholar has selectively chosen the 'blindness' related writings *The other Senses* by Preeti Monga, *Face to Face* by Ved Mehta and *Lights out* by L.Subramani, These writers' personal experiences have supplied enormous energy to the person who feels aloof or alone in society. Self-confidence is an important aspect not only for the disabled but also for the abled.

The conclusion discusses on literature reflects culture, refracts beliefs or challenges and transmits the feelings of the writers into the level of reader- oriented or author-oriented text. It has been used deliberately to normalize groups of individuals and create social change. People with cognitive disabilities are common in most parts of the world. Previously, their voices, thoughts and insights are sidelined and declared the result as helpless or hopeless. Several reputed NGOs play a very significant role in the upliftment of disabled people. As a result, there has been phenomenal development towards an acknowledgement of the normalcy of disability. Thus this study is not an end to this field; it is only a beginning for the upcoming researchers.

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